

A trip down Light Shock Lane. Part 2 - The Unreleaseables

Written by dreamkatcha.

Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

None of this would have been possible without the fantastic resources generously provided by immensely talented emulator authors, and communities such as Hall of Light, Lemon Amiga, Lemon 64, World of Spectrum, Moby Games, World of Longplays and Recorded Amiga Games. Thank you for your tireless dedication to preserving the history of gaming.

RunBall

Alluded to in the CD32 Gamer developer profile that spurred this article, were the scant details of an intriguing, duel Amiga/PC work-in-progress title called 'RunBall'.



We were informed by Francesco that "this is one of those games that is really hard to explain ... it combines certain facets of Mortal Kombat but it is not a fighting game. It's quite bizarre and lends itself to a Don Bluth game certainly in its visual presentation".

A couple of captivating screenshots accompanied the line, and the rest was left for our mind's eye to conjure with. Sadly, evidence of its fleeting cameo now resides in my 'Games that Weren't' archive. Even so, it's always fun to contemplate what might have been, and as luck would have it, Francesco agrees.



Q: I was just wondering when I'll be able to get my mitts on RunBall for my Amiga CD32. I've been waiting 21 years now. ;)

A: Oh boy, someone still remembers, and also managed to track me down. Funnily enough, I was looking at some of the RunBall assets a couple of weeks ago...

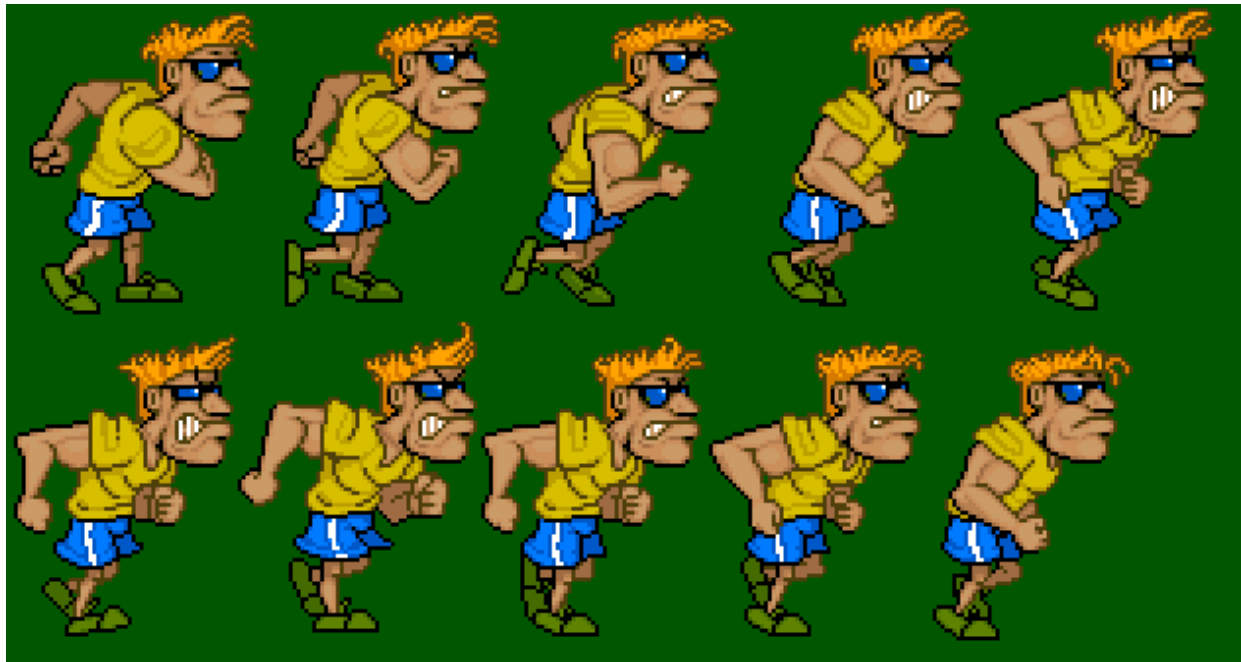
Q: Amazing coincidence that you'd be checking out your old work at the same time I was reading about it in CD32 Gamer magazine.

I've made a habit of researching 'Amiga Games that Weren't' for the blog I contribute to. Many of them are not much more than brainstorming exercises so there's little to base an article on, but sometimes I strike it lucky, as I did recently with the generous help of some ex-Microprose employees in relation to their abandoned platform game, 'Boo!'

A: The reason I was looking at the material is that recently it has been 20 years since the publication of two of the games I worked on, and with a group of friends we were reminiscing the good old days...

Q: It's nice to hear that some of you stayed in touch after all this time.

A: We still get in touch every now and then, it's fun to remember that time.



Q: From the screenshots and couple of accompanying sentences, RunBall looks a bit like a scrolling beat-em-up, though with a more advanced set of combat manoeuvres typically found in one-on-one fighting games. Would that be an accurate description?

A: RunBall was not to be a fighting game, but rather a two-on-two dodgeball-style game, somewhat inspired by WindJammers on NeoGeo.

Q: How far along were you with RunBall, and how much of it have you retained?

A: We had a version of RunBall that was nearly playable, and one where four AI players would play a game.

The AI was pretty crude and we only have the full set of animation for one character (Joe), so it would have taken a fair amount of work to complete it.

We were also working on other games at the same time, and since we couldn't settle on a decent, fun gameplay for RunBall we decided to pause working on it, and the pause became a freeze.



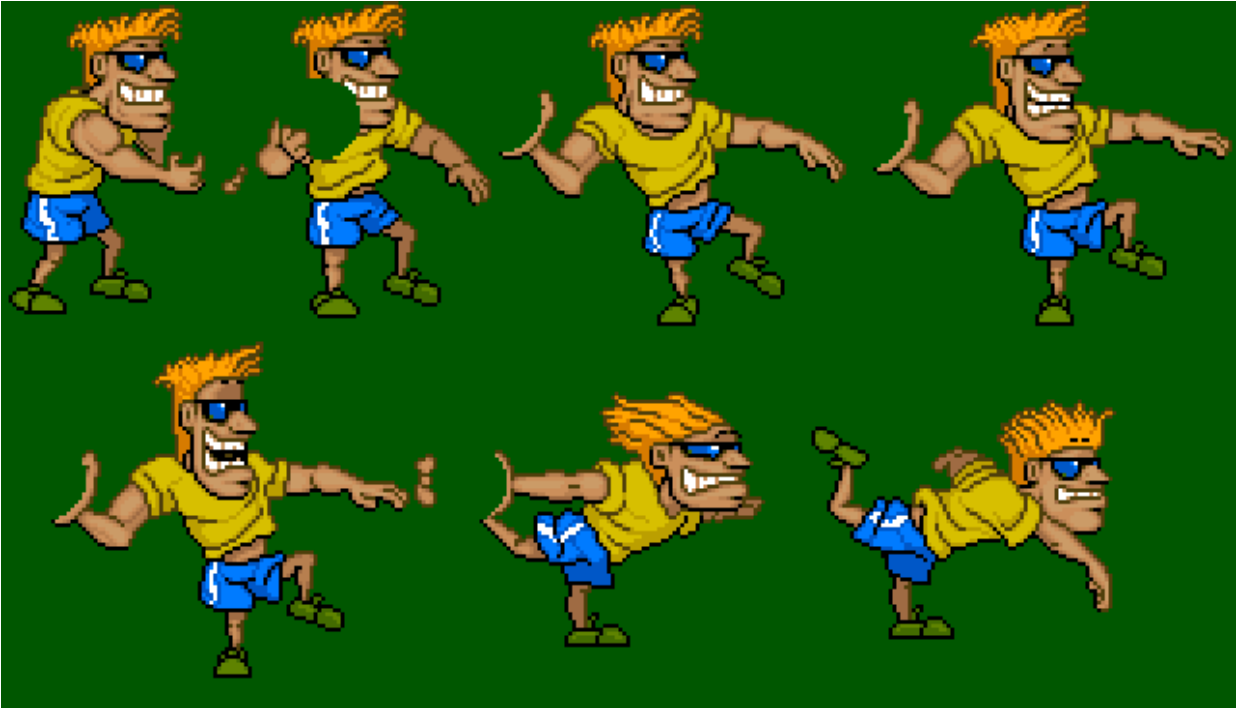
Q: I got the impression you were juggling many potential titles back then, and there were always going to be casualties. It's just the way it goes when you're experimenting with new concepts I suppose. Do you have any video footage or stills you'd be happy for me to showcase?

A: I have some material on RunBall of course, but first I want to check with my friends about what we are collectively comfortable releasing...



Q: If you wanted to revive the project, now is probably the best time there has ever been what with retro gaming being so popular and Kickstarter there to help with the funding and promotion.

A: Reviving a project also requires time to work on it, quite a rare commodity in my life...



USA Racing

In their June 1994 issue, Amiga Power lifted the lid on Light Shock's slick, upcoming top-down car game, USA Racing. The programmer in the driver's seat, steering the vehicular assignment was Cesare Di Mauro, the man also credited "for some very good ideas about the A500 game engine" with regards to Fightin' Spirit's development.

Facts at that stage were a little thin on the ground; it would have been familiar territory to fans of Overdrive or Micro Machines and be available in time for Christmas the same year. Nevertheless, unbeknownst to us, that was to be the last we would hear of the elusive title for a computing eternity, if you're familiar with the concept of Moore's Law. The marshal's flag was lost to the wind before it hit the deck, and the project stalled in the pitstop, as others took precedence.



"The Sicilian team had a tremendous passion for Neo Geo arcade games, from SNK and other publishers, and that was reflected both in the choice of games (Fightin' Spirit and USA Racing) and in the graphics style, which was essentially a clone of SNK's.

Just like Fightin' Spirit was heavily influenced by Fatal Fury (erroneously defined a clone of Street Fighter by Amiga Power), USA Racing was going to be similar to Thrash Rally, but none of the publishers were interested in releasing a top-down vertical scrolling racing game, and the project was abandoned.

We had a demo of Fightin' Spirit for PC VGA too, but again no publisher at that time felt the PC platform was a reasonable choice for a 2D fighting game in 1996."

Francesco Iorio

Clueing us in on the progress of the project at that stage, Cesare's CV tells us, "an integrated development system with a GUI was written in assembly language to handle sprites, palettes, bobs (Blitter objects), images, tiles, tile-maps, and street boundaries".



Explaining the game's fate, he reveals...

"USA Racing (which we internally renamed World Racing, after I and my graphic artist left the Dynamic Style team) was unfinished and then abandoned. I still keep all the code, graphic, and soundtracks (developed by Davide Busetta).

However, it was a very big project, and required A LOT of time to be completed. Consider that the map of a single game level had a 8192 x 65536 pixels resolution (with 32 colors), used 480KB of graphic memory only for the tiles, and required a special "editor" (which I've written for general games development) to build the "runnable road" boundaries and to mark the special flags that appeared during the race. It was an enormous work for the artist, and that's why it never saw the light."

You can read more of Cesare's thoughts on the challenges he faced and the way in which he overcame them in an article entitled, 'Shadow of the 16-bit Beast: an Amiga gaming retrospective' by Jeremy Reimer.



Overdrive

According to Derek dela Fuente's developer profile in CD32 Gamer, Francesco coded the DOS version of Overdrive for Team 17 whilst working at Holodream. Oddly enough, nowhere online is he credited for his work. Instead the game is attributed to Psionic Systems. Holodream also developed F17 Challenge, another Team 17 game, which left me wondering if it was possible that Derek got the two games mixed up, what with them both being car racing titles released by the same publisher.



Out of the blue unearthing another 'game that wasn't' tale, Francesco cleared up the mystery for me. You can bet I was on the edge of my seat.

"Ah, that is another interesting and sad story.

Matteo Tesser and I (high school friends) started working on making games while in high school, using the brand "Holografix Software" and wrote a couple of game demos, namely a vertical scrolling game for PC and Amiga, using both code and graphics produced by ourselves.

When we saw Team 17 publishing F17 Challenge, made by Holodream (Fabrizio Farenga), we decided to contact him to start a collaboration.

We met him in Rome in 1993 to discuss a partnership and he asked us to work on a PC version of F17 Challenge. Fabrizio commissioned to one of his artists the conversion of F17 graphics into 256 colors, and we produced a small demo (which I still have). He got Team 17 interested and we proceeded towards making the rest of the game, but after a couple of months they dropped the project.

We reused the engine several years later at Light Shock to create a demo game inspired by F-Zero.

After dropping the project, in the summer of 1993 Team 17 asked us and other teams to try our hand at fast 8-direction scrolling routine to serve as the basis for a PC conversion of Overdrive, with a minimum target platform being a 386SX 25MHz, VGA and the original Soundblaster.



To do the original Amiga game justice, we proposed a scrolling routine nobody had ever produced before, running a full 60Hz on the target minimum platform.

The only game that ran at that speed was Digital Illusions' Pinball Dreams series, using the then just discovered VGA Mode X. Using Mode X they could store the entire pinball board in the VGA RAM and using the hardware screen pointer they could scroll vertically at full-screen refresh rate, leaving the background layer intact and only effectively redrawing the sprites (the ball and the paddles) every frame, just like an Amiga game would do.

We used Mode X to obtain the first ever 60Hz 8-directional map scrolling routine on PC (of which I still also have the demo), all written in x86 assembly of course, and we sent it to Team 17, which impressed with

the results decided to assign to us the conversion in the first months of 1994.

At that point in time we were young and had never worked on a complete game before, so the process was a bit of a shock. We worked tirelessly to create the full game from scratch, with the Amiga source code almost completely useless for the port (in retrospective we should have written a source-to-source compiler for the game logic). We effectively completed the game, with 5 cars on screen instead of the original 3, new music composed from scratch to use the SoundBlaster's MIDI chip (the 386SX was too slow to run the game while performing real-time 4-channel audio mixing into a single PCM output to use the original mod files), save for some bugs in the 2-player modem mode.

Unfortunately, time ran out for what they identified to be the publishing window and they decided to pull the plug again; we did not see a single penny for what was an entire 6 months of work.

As a last resort they decided to rebrand the game "Speedway Challenge" and release it in the USA, but to be honest we never knew if they ever effectively published it.

At the end of 1995 they released Overdrive for PC, a completely rewritten port by Psionic.

So who was responsible for Overdrive? Ultimately Psionic, but we handed them a 100% complete port of the game that they never shipped, which was better in pretty much every way, but never fully debugged as they asked us to stop working on it. I still have all the material, including assets, sources, music..."



Q-Star System

Amongst the previously unseen artwork extracted from unreleased WIPs and sent to me by Francesco were those relating to a vertical-scrolling, space-based shoot-em-up. My initial reflex was of the double-take variety - it's equally as striking aesthetically as Core's Banshee, the shoot-em-up that raised the bar on what we believed to be feasible on the Amiga.

Anticipating a barrage of questions, Francesco went on to fill in the blanks...

"QSS is short for Q-Star System, a shoot'em up that Matteo Tesser and I started on the Amiga before we made Overdrive, and went through multiple transformations (graphics style and platform) until it took the form you can see in the screenshots I sent you (PC, VGA).

I have some material from all the different versions, from where it started on the Amiga to the last version that I sent you...

We only "completed" the first level, including music, but we never found a publisher for it...

QSS was started when Matteo and I were still in high school together, it brings back many memories..."

Persevering with the excavation of old archives for signs of ghosts of his gaming past, Francesco finally hit gold...

"The first (QSS1 images) was originally developed for PC and was basically a technical demo. All code and graphics were made by Matteo Tesser and myself.

The logo features a stylized orange 'Q' with a white dot in the center, followed by the word 'STAR' in red and 'SYSTEM' in blue, all set against a starry space background.

Q • STAR
SYSTEM

The text is overlaid on a curved horizon of a reddish planet, likely Mars, against a black background.

**Holografix
Software
Team
presenta:**

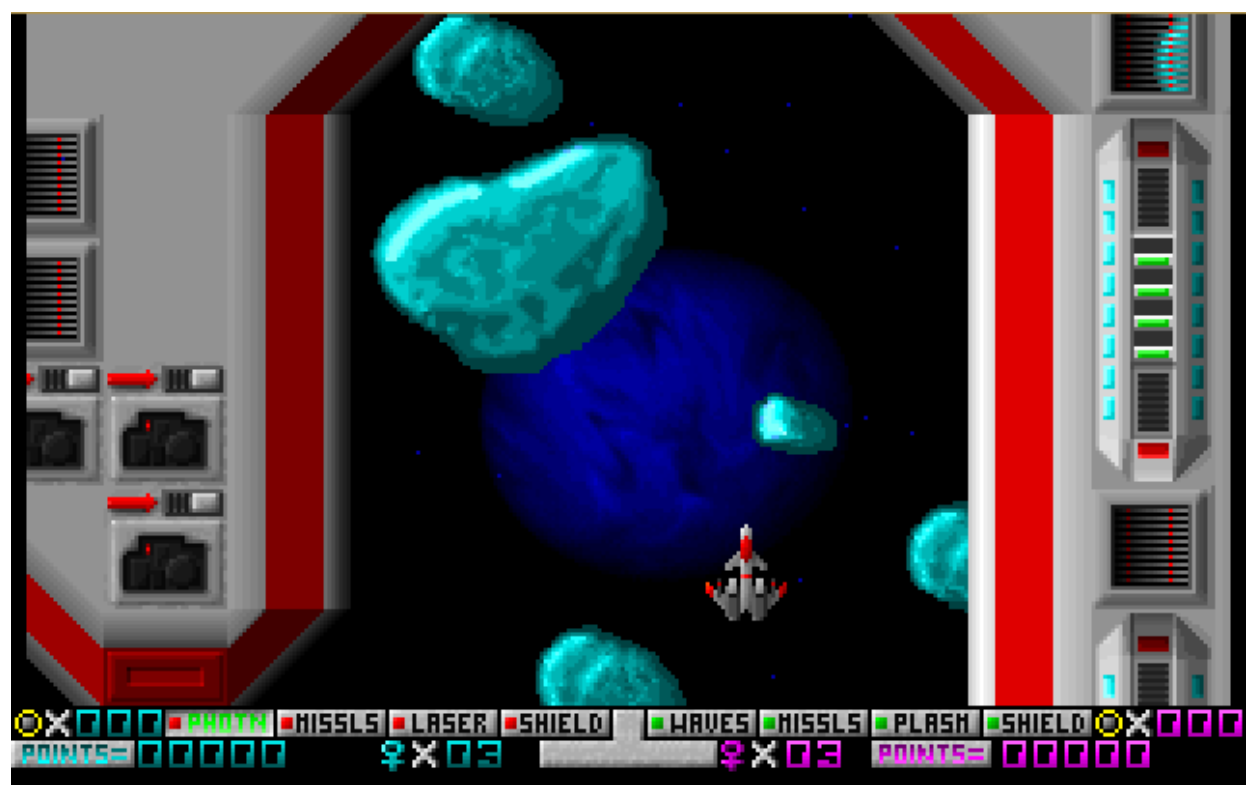
**Q-Star
System**



The second one (QSS2 images) is an extension of the first QSS demo to include one full level, which is nearly completely playable, and all tools (map editor, sprite grabber, enemy positioning and trajectory tools) exist.

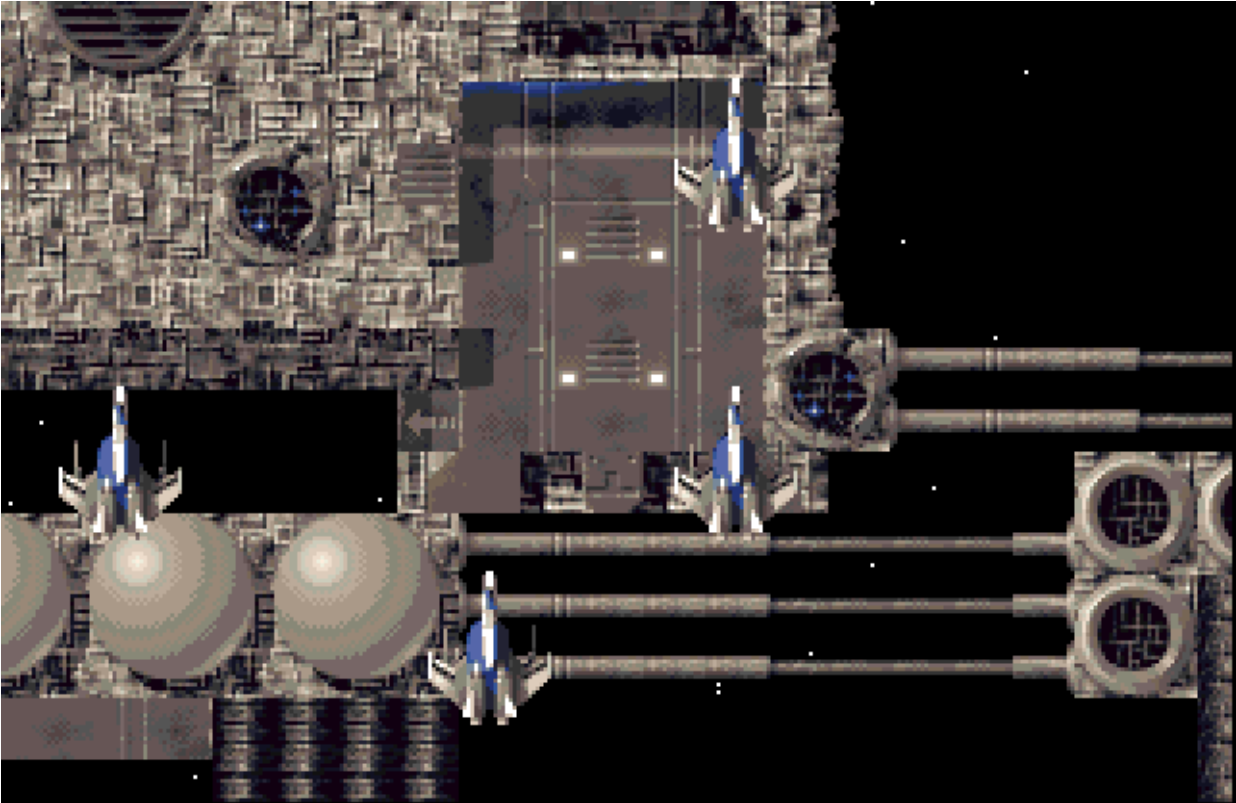
Q-Star SYSTEM

DETAIL
ONE PLAYER
START GAME
QUIT 2 DOS





The third one (QSS3 image) is a technical demo on the Amiga (in 32 colors). It is not fully playable and only a handful of tools exist (mostly the map editor and the sprite grabber). The code was written primarily by me and if I recall correctly the entire graphics set was made by Marco Genovesi, the artist who created all the graphics for Black Viper, but this was way before he worked on Black Viper.



The fourth one (QSS4 images) is a fully playable 1-level demo, with most tools available. The code was again Matteo Tesser and I, while the graphics were created entirely by Massimiliano Calamai.

Even though we remade the engine a few times, we never completed a full game, and it is something all of us recall fondly, but with some sadness as it may have been a quite competent shoot 'em up for either the Amiga or the PC..."







When a game this majestic slips through the cracks, you can't help ruminating the 'what if?' potential of injecting that last-ditch shot of resuscitating adrenaline.

With a twinge of hope in my heart I pointed out that several brand new Amiga games are released each year, along with the odd rediscovered 'lost cause' title. I suggested that the small number of Amiga scene developers who remain active may be able to assist in kneading QSS into a releasable shape.

To my delight Francesco was on the same page and open to the possibilities.

"I have been thinking about resurrecting some of those games myself, but it would be certainly interesting to communicate to some people who more regularly contribute to these "resurrections" :-)"

If the finished article came to fruition and was made available for the Amiga platform, of course the fans would love it to be an enhanced AGA release. To establish its prospects as such I put the question to Francesco.

"The last version of the game (the most refined) was meant for PC VGA, with all the graphics being in 256 colours, therefore it could be made into an AGA-only game, but was never planned on Amiga.

The third version (with grey sci-fi theme) was being designed for Amiga in 32 colours, but of course, it could be enhanced for AGA too.

Getting some of the old crew involved would be the best, I will talk to some of them to see if they have any time at all. :)

If the target is the Amiga, then the basic engine was mine (it needs a lot of work, but it's doable) and the graphics from Marco (he would need to make more for the enemies and the maps), who works in London at a famous VFX company.

I want to ask some of the other people too, we'll see what they say..."

Perhaps a glimmer of hope for justice to prevail after all!